

## Bruno Carvalho.

### **Porous City: A Cultural History of Rio de Janeiro**

As the title of Carvalho's book implies, porosity is a vital concern in understanding Rio de Janeiro and her history. To get away from the easy conceptualization of Rio as a divided city—that of wealthy high-rises and poverty-stricken favelas—Carvalho adopts porosity as a way of understanding the Cidade Nova (the New City), one of the city's most symbolic neighborhoods. Fundamentally, Carvalho makes more complex the oversimplified binary of the “two Rios,” two easily separable and noninteracting entities: center and periphery, black and white, *asfalto* and *morro*. Such dualisms often permeate works on the city, but such separation is, for Carvalho, too formulaic, especially in a city where “the quickest way from A to B is rarely a straight line” (14). The mixing and interacting within a context of socioeconomic disparity is central to Rio's vitality and strongly influenced the role the city—and specifically the Cidade Nova—played in the construction of Brazilian cultural practices. *Porous City*, drawing on cultural sources as well as data, delves deep into one of Rio's geographic and spiritual centers, a place where porosity was most prominent and one that “was instrumental to the making of Brazilian culture” (xii). It was, for example, the birthplace of samba.

“Porosity” is a term that Carvalho develops from Walter Benjamin's 1925 essay on the city of Naples, in which Benjamin said that “porosity is the inexhaustible law of the life of this city, reappearing everywhere” (10).<sup>1</sup> The term implies a spatial quality of interaction and dialogue between distinct spaces, and Carvalho posits the Cidade Nova as an emblematic place of porosity. He chooses the Cidade Nova to examine in depth because that neighborhood's “history and its representations provide a key to help us unlock some of the city's dilemmas” (11). The Cidade Nova, Carvalho argues, serves as a microcosm of the rest of the city, and—in many ways—of the nation as a whole. There is little book-length scholarship about this fascinating and vital neighborhood, and he draws on understudied or overlooked sources. In this sense, Carvalho's study marks an important contribution in understanding Brazil's cultural capital.

While the concept of porosity is spatial, Carvalho adopts a (chronological) historical approach to deepen our vision of the neighborhood over the past two

hundred years. Indeed, the subtitle, "A Cultural History of Rio de Janeiro (from the 1810s Onward)," sets up the structure in which each chapter provides both a distinct snapshot of the neighborhood in its urban context and an account of its evolution. Broadly speaking, each chapter develops a period in the history of the neighborhood, with the dominant focus on the period up until the 1940s. Perhaps his study should be considered limited for this reason. He relegates the treatment of the neighborhood in the last sixty years to his conclusion, which brings the story of the area up to the present day but without much detail, with only occasional passing references in other chapters. It is, in effect, a story of the life and death of a neighborhood, as though its story completely ended with certain developments in the 1940s. A more specific subtitle or a more thorough development of the decline and decadence of the neighborhood in recent times would help the reader further comprehend the importance of the area in the *carioca* imaginary both in the past and up to the present day. Indeed, the current moment is of particular intrigue as the city prepares to host the Olympics and the neighborhood is again the center of fierce change.

*Porous City* draws on a multitude of sources, including plays, novels, short stories, poems, music, paintings, and essays, as well as records, censuses, plans, letters, newspapers, and magazines. Nonetheless, the point of departure for almost every chapter is literature. In the first chapter, which focuses on Rio as the imperial capital of the Portuguese empire and the ramifications of that shift, Carvalho dissects Manuel Antônio de Almeida's *Memórias de um sargento de milícias* (1852, but set earlier). Almeida's text deals with "how this newly inhabited zone would function within the lettered cartographies and cultural geography—as a space perceived as marginal while paradoxically being in the geographic center" (20). In this case, Carvalho makes a clear distinction between "here" and "there," with "here" being the Old City (the Rua de Ouvidor and Quintana, in particular) and "there" being the New City. The Cidade Nova is represented as something "vague and distant" (22), a tendency that changes in the literature later in the century.

Carvalho's second chapter, "A Master on the Periphery of the Periphery," focuses on Machado de Assis and a return to the Rua de Ouvidor—the center of Rio's lettered old city. During the late nineteenth century and into the *belle époque*, even though the Cidade Nova was at the center of the city and was home to thousands, "it would seldom appear as a central place in the literature of the period" (50). Early Machado, Carvalho argues, seemed to participate in "the flat-

tened notion of a divided Rio de Janeiro" (55)—simply seeing the city as two cities—before developing a more complex portrayal of the city that has established Machado as a great author. Machado played on those very dichotomies, aware of his audience and his surroundings, as well as being a reader himself of the complex social situation. Carvalho, in the most detailed and comprehensive chapter, deals with this idea magnificently. His work (Carvalho focuses on *Os braços*, 1885) "attempts to bridge not only the divide between Cidade Nova and Lapa Street, but also to the prestigious Ouvidor Street of so much of his public, not to mention his publishing house. He seems to act as a mediator, then, between the stigmatized and those who stigmatized" (66). This delicacy of social perception was one of Machado's most intriguing elements, and Carvalho conceptualizes it beautifully within the framework of porosity.

In subsequent chapters, the point of departure again focuses on the literary: on Aluísio Azevedo, Lima Barreto, Graça Aranha, João do Rio, and the poet Murilo Mendes. In each, Carvalho demonstrates how "porosity" occupies an increasingly central position in the cultural representation of the neighborhood, even if the dominant perception of the city was of division. The discourse of "the idea—or at least the hypothesis—that there are 'two Rios de Janeiro'" emerged in the early twentieth century as the Cidade Nova itself became a border, "between Rio the capital of Brazil and 'another city' altogether, a semi-suburban milieu of barefooted blacks and of a more morose, unhurried rhythm" (80). In the associated cultural production, there is a clear transition from the "there" of Almeida's treatment, through Machado's vision, and then to João do Rio (who "positions himself carefully as an outsider") and Lima Barreto, who places Cidade Nova "at the center of a narrative [and] as its subject" (95) in *Numa e a Ninfa*. The literary representations Carvalho explores—beginning with Machado—and the cultural manifestations in the many other sources he discusses (radio, popular music, and journalism, among others) contradict the easy designation of a binary city. Even though the Cidade Nova gradually "became central to particular lettered cartographies," as Carvalho puts it, in the final chapters he shows the demise of the neighborhood under Vargas, when it "was largely obliterated from actual cultural geography" (202). Its end was somewhat abrupt.

Over the course of two hundred years, spaces of "mixture" were stymied as the governing elites sought to "drive out those aspects of fluidity and interchange that paradoxically marked the formation of Brazil's dominant cultures and which were frequently concentrated on the Cidade Nova and similar spaces"

(156). Therefore, porosity is vital to the cultural essence of Rio de Janeiro and Brazil and negates the idea that the city is divided: the two (or more) parts of the erroneously named divided city are interrelated, linked, and implicitly connected. Unlike other studies of the city, and to its merit, Carvalho's work demonstrates how this porosity was increasingly present in cultural works (primarily literature) and how the Cidade Nova has had a palimpsestic quality to it ever since the imperial capital moved to Rio de Janeiro. Carvalho also recognizes that porosity denotes, in a more traditional way of thinking about the formulation of Brazilian culture, the ability to "absorb elements from the most diverse traditions" (13) and thus to produce an inherently hybrid culture. Most importantly, Carvalho does not romanticize the neighborhood: at one point Cidade Nova became known as Little Africa and also welcomed many Jews and other immigrants, yet "one must resist the temptation to paint an idyllic haven of multicultural ethnic pluralism" (107). Therein lies the intrigue with the Cidade Nova: it was a seemingly constantly evolving neighborhood. Most famously, the Cidade Nova and its central square, Praça Onze, was the "cradle of samba," but with the construction of Avenida Presidente Vargas, the square was razed, "scraped from Rio de Janeiro's landscape by the same government responsible for using the musical form [samba] as an instrument of national unification" (174). The Cidade Nova was a "crucial crossroads" for understanding Rio and Brazil's cultural history, but "it was no such thing after the 1940s" (198), when it effectively ceased to exist: "Today, any sense of the Cidade Nova as an actual place seems to have vanished" (185). It would be interesting to hear a lot more about the "period of accelerated decadence" when the "Cidade Nova never recovered its protagonism of Rio de Janeiro" (192), a period that Carvalho deals with only briefly in this work.

Once again, the Cidade Nova is making headlines in Rio de Janeiro as it redevelops in preparation for the 2016 Olympics. Carvalho's study provides a very timely and relevant breakdown of the neighborhood, delving deep into its history and recognizing its centrality—both geographically and spiritually—as a vital space in the carioca and Brazilian imaginary. The long time frame that Carvalho deals with sometimes feels a little thin and unspecific, and the chapters are reduced to providing snapshots of the neighborhood and the city at certain historical moments, but the essence of contradiction and complexity of the city is aptly and importantly captured. As Carvalho mentions in the preface, Rio is often known for its "enchantment," particularly from the foreign observer's perspec-

tive. As a carioca who resides and wrote most of this book away from the city, it is about trying to see the city from the outside in a process of “re-enchantment” (ix) with his own city. More importantly, the book not only “reaffirms the extent to which the Cidade Nova’s past and future continue to be critical to the city” (xv); it also dispels the oversimplistic (but still very prominent) understanding of Rio as a city divided into two with little coexistence. Carvalho’s treatment of the Cidade Nova makes it clear that such direct separation is impossible and that the interaction between the two sides of the coin, between the A and the B, are vital in Brazil’s past, present, and future.

## NOTE

1. Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 168.

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